

METHOD OF FORMING CHAIN LINKS
CROSS-REFERENCES TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This is a continuation of pending U.S. Patent Application 10/356,102, filed January 31, 2003, which is a continuation of U.S. Patent Application 10/107,994 filed 5 March 27, 2002, which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. Application 09/473,594 filed December 29, 1999, now U.S. Patent 6,389,790.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to a method of forming chain links for use in making fine jewelry rope chains, and more specifically, to method of contouring the outer periphery 10 of individual links.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

A fine jewelry "rope" chain is usually comprised of individual links intertwined to form a chain having the appearance of a double helix. The intertwining of such links is customarily done by hand, with gaps facilitating the interengagement or intertwining of 15 links to form a chain. The rope chain art has evolved considerably since its inception, to the extent that a layman probably takes for granted the complicated and various methods used to create a highly decorative and ornamental piece of jewelry.

The appearance of individual links and the manner in which such links are intertwined to form a chain usually dictate the appearance of the resultant chain. The 20 prior art is replete with rope chains formed from solid and hollow links having all different shapes and sizes. Such links are also formed using a variety of methods. Conventionally, a solid or hollow wire is wrapped around a supporting core and then cut so that the wire separates into individual pieces, each piece having a gap for intertwining with other pieces (the term "wire" is customarily used in the jewelry rope chain art and 25 will be used herein to designate a solid strand of material, or a flat, stamped material that has been rolled into an elongated strand of tubular cross-section). After the wire is cut, and before the individual pieces can be intertwined, the pieces are flattened into links. Other methods of creating links are known in the art, including punching an individual

link from a sheet of material using a one-step process as taught by Rozenwasser in U.S. Pat. No. 5,544,477 or a two-step process as taught by Grando in U.S. Pat. No. 5,309,704.

Recently, there has been a movement in the rope chain field toward highly decorative surface ornamentation, where the outer surface or periphery of individual chain links are modified or materially altered, both before and after they have been formed into a rope chain. Surface ornamentation usually occurs after the links have been assembled into a rope chain, through methods widely known in the art. This usually involves the creation of a rope chain, followed by the faceting, notching, cutting, bending, deforming, scraping or the like, of distinct portions of such chain, until the desired surface effect is achieved on exposed portions of individual links and the chain as a whole.

Certain methods of surface ornamentation are dependent or preferred based on the type of link used to form the chain, while other methods are preferred depending on the desired effect one wishes to achieve. For example, U.S. Pat. No. 5,129,220 to Strobel and U.S. Pat. No. 5,353,584 to Strobel et al., disclose the incremental deforming, by a blunt, burnishing tool, of a hollow link rope chain, which, after several passes by such tool, results in individual links having flattened exposed surfaces. U.S. Pat. No. 5,285,625 to Ofrat et al. discloses the use of a diamond cut forming machine to create diamond cut facets extending spirally around the longitudinal center of the chain, while U.S. Pat. No. 5,303,540 to Rozenwasser discloses the use of a diamond-cutting edge to create shallow depressions along the surface of a thin plate of metal that will eventually be formed into a wire and then a link. The Rozenwasser '540 patent also discloses the creation of shallow depressions on a wire prior to dividing or cutting into links, while U.S. Pat. No. 5,412,935, also to Rozenwasser, discloses the cutting of facets into a link having a raised surface. See also U.S. Pat. No. 5,537,812 to Rozenwasser. U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,471,830 and 5,526,639 to Gonzales disclose the cutting of an assembled rope chain to create a continuously curved surface.

In addition to providing surface ornamentation in the form of faceting and contouring, the overall appearance of rope chains has in the past been altered by using

links of various shapes. For example in U.S. Design Pats. 368,048 and 370,184 and 370,426 all to Rozenwasser, modified "C"-shaped links are intertwined to form jewelry rope chains having unique overall designs. While the design of each link is ornamentally unique, each link has a consistent inner and outer peripheral surface and profile and a
5 consistent thickness along such profile.

The faceting and contouring of assembled rope chains has become fairly complicated to meet the demands for unique surface configurations. This has resulted in contouring methods and machinery of increased complexity. There exists a need, therefore, for a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains that is relatively
10 uncomplicated, efficient to implement, inexpensive in its operation, and provides the designer with a multitude of contouring options unseen or unexperienced in the prior art. Recognizing this need, the present inventor has devised a method of creating ornamentally desirable rope chains by fashionably contouring the outer periphery of individual links, thereby avoiding the costly process of enlisting complicated machinery
15 to act upon ever-increasingly complicated rope chain configurations. More specifically, one embodiment of the method of the present invention involves the arrangement of individual links onto a mandril, followed by the contouring of the outer periphery of such links by hand, machine or the like. After the individual links have been contoured as desired, the links are removed from such mandril and assembled into rope chains using
20 methods known in the art. In other embodiments, the outer peripheries of individual links are contoured without the use of a mandril.

OBJECTS OF THE INVENTION

It is an object of the present invention, therefore, to provide a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains that is relatively uncomplicated, efficient to
25 implement, inexpensive in its operation, and provides the designer with a multitude of contouring options.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains by contouring the outer periphery of individual chain links prior to assembly into rope chains.

It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains by contouring the outer periphery of a coiled wire prior to separation into individual links and assembly of such links into rope chains.

5 It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains by arranging individual chain links onto a mandril prior to contouring the outer periphery of such links.

10 It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of creating fashionably contoured rope chains by arranging individual chain links onto a mandril and contouring the outer periphery of such links along one or a variety of locations along such outer periphery.

It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links by contouring the outer peripheries of such links, whether created from a wire, a punching process or the like, while arranged on a mandril.

15 It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links by contouring the outer peripheries of such links by hand, machine or the like.

It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links by arranging such links on a preferably flexible mandril for passage through contouring apparatus.

20 It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links by punching, stamping or die extruding links with contoured outer peripheries.

It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links having inner and outer peripheries of different shapes.

25 It is a still further object of the present invention to provide a method of forming chain links having a non-uniform thickness.

Still other objects and advantages of the invention will become clear upon review of the following detailed description in conjunction with the appended drawings.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Individual chain links used in forming jewelry rope chains are provided, being formed from solid or hollow wire, punched or the like, and being produced using methods known in the art. The outer peripheries of such links are contoured prior to 5 assembly into rope chains. In one embodiment, the outer periphery of links are contoured during the creation of the link, which can occur during a stamping process, or while the link material is still in the form of a wire. In another embodiment, non-contoured links are arranged on a mandrel, and the outer peripheries of such links are then contoured as desired. Contouring of the outer periphery can be accomplished by hand, machine or the 10 like. Prior to contouring of the outer periphery, the individual chain links or material made therefrom may or may not have a gap for intertwining with other links to form a rope chain. If individually created links are not provided with a gap, i.e., if the links have continuous inner and outer peripheries, then a gap can be formed into such links as part 15 of the contouring step. The outer peripheries of wire or links used in the formation of rope chains may be contoured using a single stroke or pass by a contouring mechanism, or several passes, until the desired contouring is achieved.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is an isometric view of a wire wound around a support illustrating a prior art method of forming links for the assembly of rope chains.

20 Figure 2 is a front view of a prior art link used in the assembly of rope chains.

Figure 3 is an isometric view of one method of forming chain links for assembly into rope chains, illustrating the contouring the outer periphery of a wire prior to segmenting into individual links.

25 Figure 4 is a front view of an individual link having a contoured outer periphery formed in accordance with a method of the present invention.

Figure 5 is a diagrammatic view of a stamping method of forming chain links having contoured outer peripheries for assembly into rope chains and the like.

Figure 6 is a front view of a link that will be contoured in accordance with one method of the present invention.

Figure 7 is an isometric view of a mandril onto which links are arranged prior to contouring the outer peripheries of such links.

Figure 8 is an edge view of a link arranged on a mandril.

5 Figure 9 is an isometric view of a plurality of links slidably arranged on a mandril.

Figure 10 is an isometric view of a mandril provided with a stopping means along one edge thereof.

Figure 11 is a top, diagrammatic view of a link-loaded mandril being passed through contouring apparatus.

10 Figure 12 is a top, diagrammatic view of a link-loaded mandril being passed on each side through a single contouring apparatus.

Figure 13 is a top, diagrammatic view of a link-loaded mandril being passed through multiple contouring apparatus.

15 Figures 14a through 14bp illustrate a variety of individual link configurations capable of being produced in accordance with the method of the present invention.

Figure 15 is an edge view of a link having continuous inner and outer peripheries arranged on a mandril.

Figure 16 is an edge view of a link-loaded mandril passing through contouring apparatus.

20 Figure 17 is a representation of a rope chain created from links formed in accordance with method of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Rope chain links are usually contoured after the links are formed into chains by passing such chains through contouring implements, such as cutters, presses and the like.

25 Solid links are conventionally contoured or faceted by cutting, while hollow links are conventionally contoured or faceted by pressing or stamping.

In accordance with the method of the present invention, contouring of the outer periphery of chain links occurs prior to assembly of such links into rope chains. In one embodiment, the wire used in the formation of intertwinable links is contoured and then

cut into individual, pre-contoured links. In another embodiment, the outer periphery of non-contoured links are individually contoured prior to the intertwining of such links to form actual rope chains. In yet another embodiment, individual links are collectively contoured after they are arranged on a supporting structure, such as a mandril. Such links

5 may be contoured by hand or machine as the case may be. If a machine is used to contour links supported on a mandril, for example, it is preferable that the links are supported on a flexible mandril, particularly if the passage of links through or by contouring apparatus occurs along a circuitous route. It will be understood that chain links or links of any size, shape, thickness, material and cross-section may be used, for

10 the method of the present invention is not meant to be limited to any particular link configuration. Therefore, while certain link cross-sections are shown for purposes of illustrations, whether they be annular or rectangular, it will be understood that the overall shape of the link could also be oval, triangular, square or the like.

In accordance with another aspect of the method of the present invention, non-intertwinnable links, i.e., rings or links initially without gaps for intertwining to form rope chains, may be arranged on a supporting mandril, with the gaps formed into such links as part of the contouring process. In other words, as the outer peripheries of the links are being contoured, a gap will be cut between the inner and outer peripheries of such links for intertwining with other links to form rope chains. Consequently, the contouring and

20 the gap creation can be accomplished during a single manufacturing process, which reduces costs, improves efficiency and prevents the creation of a link initially provided with a gap, which can be a complexity when links are formed by stamping or punching.

The following detailed description is of the best mode or modes of the invention presently contemplated. Such description is not intended to be understood in a limiting sense, but to be an example of the invention presented solely for illustration thereof, and by reference to which in connection with the following description and the accompanying drawings one skilled in the art may be advised of the advantages and construction of the invention.

Intertwinable links used in the formation of jewelry rope chains are usually created using one of two well known methods. Figure 1 illustrates one method that is well known in the art, where a solid or hollow wire 5 is first coiled around a support structure 7 and then a portion of such wire is sliced along the longitudinal axis of the support structure 7 to form individual wire segments, which segments are then flattened into intertwinable links. Another well known method of forming links is by stamping or punching, an example of which is shown in U.S. Pat. No. 5,544,477 to Rozenwasser.

Figure 2 is a front view of a conventional link 10 used in the formation of rope chains, said link 10 having an outer periphery 12 of a predetermined shape, an inner periphery 14 of a predetermined shape, a gap 16 and a thickness 18. The outer periphery 12 of said link 10 is divided into a gap location 20 along which contouring is not useful, and a contouring surface 22 along which contouring is possible. Said link 10 may be formed from a solid or hollow wire 5 as is known in the art shown in Figure 1, or may be formed by stamping or punching as is also known in the art. Other methods may also be used to form a link that is to be contoured in accordance with the methods of the present invention. Also, it will be understood that while wires and links of certain profiles and cross-sectional configurations are used herein for purposes of illustration herein, any shaped wire and any shaped link may be used.

The conventional link 10 of Figure 2 used in the assembly of rope chains has certain noteworthy characteristics. First, the inner and outer peripheries 12 and 14 respectively have the same or similar shape. In Figure 2, the link 10 has an annular configuration along its inner and outer periphery. Second, the thickness 18 of the link 10 is generally consistent from end to end. Contrary to convention, the links of the present invention, after they have been contoured in accordance with the teachings of the present invention, however, generally do not have consistent inner and outer peripheries, and generally do not have a consistent thickness throughout.

In accordance with one method of the present invention of forming chain links for assembly into rope chains, as shown in Figure 3, a contouring apparatus 90 is drawn across, or is passed across the outer periphery 30 of the wire 5 while the wire 5 is

supported on a support structure 7. One such support structure 7 might be an ice lathe as shown and as taught in U.S. Patent 5,737,910 to Rozenwasser. Similarly, the contouring apparatus could be stationary, and the wire 5 passed thereby. The outer periphery 30 of the wire 5 is contoured, while the inner periphery 32 remains unaffected, or retains its
5 original shape. Once the outer periphery 30 of the wire has been contoured as desired, the wire is separated into segments and flattened into chain links.

Figure 4 is a front view of a link 25 produced in accordance with the method illustrated in Figure 3. The link 25 has a plurality of grooves 34-38 along the outer periphery 30, a gap 40 and an inner periphery 32 that remains unaffected by the
10 contouring apparatus 90. The gap 40 might be formed during the contouring operation by contouring the outer periphery 30 through to the inner periphery 32. The grooves 34-37 in Figure 4 along one side of the outer periphery 30 have the same appearance, while the groove 38 along the other side has a different appearance. Consequently, the contouring operation does not have to be consistent along the entire outer periphery,
15 although it could be if desired.

In accordance with another method of the present invention of forming chain links for assembly into rope chains, as shown in Figure 5, a link 45 might be stamped or punched from a single sheet 50, with such link 45 having a contoured outer periphery 46 and an non-contoured inner periphery 47. The contouring can comprise a plurality of
20 grooves 48,49 on opposite sides, which create a symmetrical appearance along the vertical axis through the center of the link. Several links 45, therefore, can be assembled into rope chains and other jewelry items that have inner and outer peripheries of different shapes or profiles. In accordance with yet another method of the present invention of forming chain links for assembly into rope chains, such links might also be die extruded
25 or the like, having inner and outer peripheries of different shapes or profiles.

Figure 6 is a front view of a link 60 used to illustrate another method of the present invention of forming chain links for assembly into rope chains. Link 60 has a non-contoured outer and inner periphery 62 and 64 respectively, a gap 66 and a thickness 68. In accordance with yet another method of the present invention of forming chain

links for assembly into rope chains, the outer peripheries 62 of individual links 60 are contoured in unison by, for example, loading such links onto a mandril, which provides a support structure for group contouring.

Figure 7 is an isometric view of a mandril 100 having an outer periphery 110 of a predetermined shape, that, for purposes of explanation, has a cross-section generally in the form of an inverted "T", comprised of a primary support section 120 and an extended support section or protrusion 130. The mandril 100 also has a first end or edge 140 and a second end or edge 150, and may be rigid or flexible depending on the needs of the user. The mandril 100 is designed to support a single link 60 or a plurality of links slidably arranged thereon, for eventual passage of the link-loaded mandril through contouring apparatus.

Figure 8 is an edge view illustration of link 60 situated about or arranged on a mandril 100, with the outer periphery 110 of mandril 100 designed to accommodate the inner periphery 64 of link 60, so that link 60 can slide along the outer periphery 110 of mandril 100. The support section 130 of mandril 100 extends or protrudes into the gap area 66 of the link 10, which section 130 further supports and centers the link 60 on the mandril 100. Again, while Figure 8 illustrates for purposes of explanation a link having a generally rectangular inner periphery slidably arranged on a mandril having a generally rectangular outer periphery, it will be understood that both the mandril and the link may be designed using other shapes, so long as the link is capable of sliding along the outer periphery of the mandril and is supportably received thereon. The clearance 125 between the outer periphery 110 of the mandril 100 and the inner periphery 64 of the link 60 will generally be sufficient enough to permit sliding of the link 10 along the mandril, but not too great so that the link 60 wobbles or rocks from side to side on the mandril 100, or is rotatable on or around said mandril. In other words, movement of the link on or along the mandril is preferably restricted to the axial direction, i.e., along the axis of the mandril. It is not necessary, however, that the clearance 125 be the same between the link and the mandril on all sides of the mandril. Since a link-loaded mandril will be passed through contouring apparatus, such links should be sufficiently supported on the

mandril so that such contouring of the outer periphery is consistent, and the clearance 125 between the mandril and the links arranged thereon, particularly adjacent the link section or sections being contoured, should not be great enough to frustrate the consistent contouring of the outer periphery of such links.

- 5 Figure 9 is an isometric view of a plurality of links 60a-60g slidably arranged on a mandril 100. The links will generally be loaded along an entrance end 150 or edge of the mandril, and slid or extended to the opposite end 140, where such links will be prevented from sliding off the mandril using a stopping means or member 142 (see Figure 10) coupled to or disposed at the end 140 of the mandril 100 opposite the entrance end 150.
- 10 The stopping member 142, illustrated in Figure 10, could take the form of a pin, wall or the like, and an equivalent stopping member could also be disposed at the entrance end of the mandril after the links have been arranged thereon to prevent such links from sliding off the entrance end of the mandril. Once links are arranged on a mandril, a hand tool may be drawn across the outer peripheries of such links to contour such outer peripheries
- 15 as desired. Such hand tool may be used to cut, score, bend or otherwise deform the outer peripheries of such links until the desired surface configuration is achieved. The contouring operation does not, however, effect the contouring of the inner peripheries of such links.

Hand contouring can be somewhat difficult, particularly if the metal is hard or the
20 desired outer periphery contour is intricate. Conventional contouring is usually
 accomplished by diamond-cutting contouring apparatus or by punches, presses or the
 like. Figure 11 is a top, diagrammatic view of a mandril 100 with a plurality of links 60,
 arranged thereon, defined collectively as a link-loaded mandril 300, being passed through
 contouring apparatus 200 and 250. Similarly, the contouring apparatus could movably
25 act upon a link-loaded mandril for contouring of the links, and it is not necessary that the
 link-loaded mandril be the moveable part that travels through the contouring apparatus.
 Contouring apparatus 200 and 250 may be cutters, shapers or the like, and act upon any
 portion of the outer peripheries, and preferably the contouring surface and not the gap
 location, of the links that are passed therethrough. For example, while Figure 11

illustrates the contouring of opposite sides of the links, it will be appreciated that the upper and lower portions of the outer peripheries of the links may also be contoured, depending on the design of the contouring apparatus and the section of the links passed therethrough. Furthermore, while a pair of contouring apparatus 200 and 250 is shown,

5 only one contouring apparatus, 200 or 250 for example, may be necessary if only one side of the outer periphery of the links are to be contoured, or, as illustrated in Figure 12, if opposite sides are to be contoured in an identical manner and a link-loaded mandrel 300 can be passed through such contouring apparatus once along each side of the mandrel.

Figure 13 is a top, diagrammatic view of a link-loaded mandrel 300, showed

10 representatively by a single line, being passed through three pairs or sets of contouring apparatus 200a-c and 250a-c. The first two pairs of contouring apparatus 200a,b and 250a,b, for example, might contour the sides of the outer peripheries of the links, while the third pair of contouring apparatus 200c and 250c, for example, might contour the upper and lower portions of the outer peripheries of the links. It will be appreciated, with

15 particular reference to Figures 11 and 12, that the mandrel upon which the links are loaded or arranged should preferably be flexible to allow a link-loaded mandrel to pass through contouring apparatus if such passage occurs along a circuitous route. A flexible mandrel also allows a link-loaded mandrel to repeatedly pass through the same contouring apparatus so that different portions of the outer peripheries can be contoured, see Figure

20 11, or to pass through different contouring apparatus arranged in a non-linear fashion as shown for example in Figure 12.

While Figures 7-13 illustrate the use of a mandrel for practicing the method of the present invention, other contouring apparatus may be used in a similar manner. For example, instead of using a mandrel, groups of links might be arranged on an ice lathe,

25 which is known in the art for contouring assembled chains, and then such links might be similarly frozen and contoured until the outer periphery assumes a desired appearance. Other supporting apparatus might be used to produce a similar desired effect.

Figures 14a-14bp illustrate a variety of individual link configurations capable of being produced in accordance with any of the methods of the present invention, each link

having a uniquely and fashionably contoured outer periphery, with a non-contoured inner periphery, and a non-uniform thickness along at least one portion of the link as compared with other portions of the link. Such figures are only representative, and are by no means exhaustive of the possible contouring variations capable of being produced using the

5 method of the present invention. Many of the links illustrated in Figures 14a-14bp have unique outer peripheral surface features. For example, some links have at least one concave surface 70 on at least one outer wall, while others have at least one flat surface 71. Other features present on at least one outer wall include at least one laterally tapering wall 72 toward one end of the outer periphery, an indent 73, a convex surface 74, an outer

10 peripheral surface 75 that is parallel in profile to the adjacent inner peripheral surface, a protrusion 76 and a plurality of "C"-shaped indentations. Other features not specifically detailed above will also be apparent with reference to such figures. The outer peripheries can also be contoured so that the links appear symmetrical about the vertical axis as shown in Figure 14a, or non-symmetrical about any axis as shown in Figure 14d. Of

15 course, the contouring possibilities are limitless. However, in each case, only the outer periphery is contoured without affecting the inner periphery. Another feature of all links shown in Figs. 14a through 14bp is that the thickness of each link is not uniform in at least one portion of the link. Figs. 14n and 14o in particular illustrate a simple rectangular link where the outer periphery has been contoured so that the thickness of the

20 vertically extending portions 78 is different from the horizontally extending portions 79, while the profile of the inner periphery remains unchanged. Of course, while Figs. 14n and 14o illustrate a symmetric outer peripheral contouring resulting in a non-uniform thickness throughout the link, such contouring could also be non-symmetric as shown in many of the links illustrated in Figs. 14a through 14bp. Irrespective of the symmetrical

25 nature of the outer peripheral contouring, the thickness along at least one portion of the perimeter of all of the links illustrated in Figs. 14a through 14bp is not uniform, whereas a prior art link of Fig. 2, which would be assembled into a rope chain as is, i.e., without a contoured outer periphery, would have a uniform thickness 18 throughout.

Figure 15 illustrates an edge view of a link 400 arranged on a mandrel 500, where said link 400 has a continuous outer periphery 420 and a continuous inner periphery 430, with a thickness 450 defined therebetween. Link 400 is not initially capable of being intertwined with other links to form a rope chain as is known in the art, since such link
5 has continuous inner and outer peripheries with no gap defined therein. However, in accordance with the method of the present invention and with particular reference to Figure 16, a gap 440 may be formed in the link 400, for enabling said link 400 to intertwine with other links to form a rope chain, as part of the contouring step. In other words, a gap 440 may be contoured into or through the links using contouring apparatus
10 600 having a gap-creating contouring bit 610, while the remaining outer periphery of the links may be fashionably contoured as described in any of the above described methods.
The contouring of the outer periphery of the links and/or the creation of a gap in a link having continuous inner and outer peripheries can occur simultaneously, or at different times, depending on the construction of the contouring apparatus acting upon a link-
15 loaded mandrel.

Figure 16 illustrates the creation of a gap region 440 in a link 400 or a plurality of links loaded or arranged on a mandrel as previously described. The mandrel 500 of Figures 15 and 16 is not equipped with a protrusion akin to the protrusion 130 of mandrel 100 described previously, for the obvious reason that the links 400 are not initially provided with a gap to accommodate such a mandrel protrusion. Even though the links 400 are not initially created or provided with a gap, and the mandrel 500 is not provided with a gap-extensive protrusion member, the links remain supported on the mandrel 500 by the interaction between the outer periphery 510 of the mandrel 500 and the inner periphery of the link or links 400, both before and after a gap is fashioned or contoured
20 into the links. For example, the rectangular configuration of both the outer periphery of the mandrel and the inner periphery of the link and the slidable clearance present
25 therebetween when the links are arranged on the mandrel, prevent the links from rotating or rocking or wobbling about the mandrel, thereby assuring consistent contouring of the outer peripheries of the links. Other mandrel and link shapes and cross sections will also

be operative, so long as the mandril prevents the links from rotating about the mandril or otherwise jeopardizing the consistent contouring of the outer periphery of the links during passage through contouring apparatus.

Once the outer peripheries of the links have been contoured, which might or

5 might not include the creation of a gap depending on whether or not the links have been provided with a gap, the links are removed from the mandril and assembled into rope chains as illustrated in Figure 17. While the method of the present invention is particularly applicable to a method of forming links for use in rope chains, it will be understood that such links may be used for other purposes. For example, fashionably

10 contoured links might be used to create other items of jewelry, such as earrings, bracelets, or the like, or such contoured links might be used in other areas of commerce not necessarily related to jewelry items.

While the present invention has been described at some length and with some particularity with respect to the several described embodiments, it is not intended that it

15 should be limited to any such particulars or embodiments or any particular embodiment, but it is to be construed with references to the appended claims so as to provide the broadest possible interpretation of such claims in view of the prior art and, therefore, to effectively encompass the intended scope of the invention. Furthermore, the foregoing describes the invention in terms of embodiments foreseen by the inventor for which an

20 enabling description was available, notwithstanding that insubstantial modifications of the invention, not presently foreseen, may nonetheless represent equivalents thereto.